

# THE INCENDIARY

RAY STANNARD BAKER IN THE YOUTH'S COMPANION.

Uncle Norman Collins was set in his opinion that the modern boy doesn't amount to much, and this opinion applied particularly to Robert Moffat, his sister's son. He didn't like the way that Robert had been brought up, and he never missed an opportunity of letting his sister Sarah know it.

"Coddling isn't what makes men," he would say, wrinkling his big shaggy brows and scowling over his black-rimmed glasses. "When I was young, boys didn't expect to be supported until they came of age and spend their time dawdling round colleges and learning Latin and Greek and football. At the time I was as old as your boy I was spending twenty thousand dollars a year and working four hundred men every winter. That's what I was doing. The Indians have the right idea. If they want a young one to swim, they chuck him into the water, and if he's good for anything he'll strike out for himself. College—ugh!"

Robert's education was a subject on which Mrs. Moffat and Uncle Norman Collins had never agreed. Uncle Norman was one of the wealthiest owners of pine lands and sawmills in northern Wisconsin. After John Moffat's death he had offered Robert a place in his office. But it had been the dearest ambition of Mrs. Moffat's heart to give her boy a college training, and so, in spite of Uncle Norman's objections, Robert had gone away to school.

Uncle Norman fumbled and grumbled, but in his crusty old heart there was a tenderness for his only sister, and each month when he called at the little house where Mrs. Moffat and Robert lived, he "forgot" a roll of bills containing fifty dollars—no more, no less. Of this money he had spoken only once. The first time he left it his sister ran after him with the bills in her hand.

"I forgot 'em," he said, shortly; "keep 'em."

And he never even asked how this money was used; and he did not know of the pinching and saving and struggling that even with its aid both mother and son had to go through in order that Robert might be maintained in college.

One June day, at the close of his third year in college, Robert Moffat walked into Uncle Norman Collins's office. He stood at the door, fingering his hat, until Uncle Norman turned in his chair and said gruffly, "Well?"

"Uncle Norman, I'm just out of college for a three months' vacation. I can go back in the fall unless I earn some money this summer, and it will be a great disappointment to me as well as to my mother if I don't finish the course. Can you give me some work to do?"

Robert had prepared this little speech and recited it to his mother with many misgivings. While he was reciting it now Uncle Norman drummed testily on his desk with a metallic letter-opener.

"Don't need any Latin or Greek translated—don't have 'em in my business," he said. "You play football, too, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Well, I haven't got any football playing to do, either—can't afford it," said his uncle, tartly.

The color crept up in Robert's face, and he bit his lip.

"What can you do?" Uncle Norman Collins questioned, fixing his keen, grey eyes on Robert's face.

"I—I—hardly know—" stammered Robert.

"So I thought," drily.

"But if you'll try, even if you'll find that I can work hard, even if it's only chopping logs."

Uncle Norman smiled grimly and looked at Robert's white hands.

"Well, sit down there and wait," he said.

Much humiliated, and with an angry consciousness that he had not been treated with proper consideration, Robert dropped into a chair. If it had not been for the thought of his mother and his keen desire to return to college, he had left the room without a word.

As Robert sat there he saw men come and go, and heard his uncle decide important business matters with a directness and clear-sightedness that gave the boy a new idea of what business may mean. Uncle Norman was the driver of the Yellow River Logging Company, which owned whole townships of pine land and half a dozen big sawmills. Thirty-five years before he had gone into the woods, penniless, a common lumberman, but as hard as a flint and as tough as a jack-pine root, and he had literally fought his way to the top.

"Now, I'll see you," Uncle Norman Collins went on; he had never called Robert by his given name. "There have been a good many mysterious fires in our pine this spring. Some reason is setting them, he's got to be brought up with a round turn. You go up there and find out who's doing it, and get the evidence to land him in the peniten-

tiary. I've got to put a stop to that sort of thing. Mellin!"

A dapper little man with a pen behind his ear darted noiselessly forward.

"Give this young man fifty dollars and start him out."

"I'm ever so much obliged," faltered Robert, but Uncle Norman Collins cut him short.

"You'll probably make a failure of it," he said. "It takes gumption for that kind of work, and gumption isn't in your college course. And it'll be lucky if you don't get a bullet through you. In four weeks I'll be up there myself to find out what you're doing."

Robert was glad to escape. He went out on the street with his cheeks burning and his teeth set.

"It's a wonder I didn't explode in there," he said to himself. "I shouldn't have stood it from him, if he wasn't mother's brother."

The next morning Robert received detailed instructions from Mellin, and the following afternoon he stepped from the train at the little flag station of Gregg's, a few miles north of Sunderland, on the Omaha Railroad. The only building in sight was the little one-story depot, freshly painted a railroad red.

Stretching away in every direction was a weary wilderness of scrub-pine, pine stumps, and gaunt and blackened staves, broken here and there with patches of barren yellow sand. Fire had followed the lumbermen and left the country desolate. Out from the corner of the depot a country road, heavy with sand, crooked away among the stumps. Where it crossed the railroad track a big, new sign warned the public in fine sarcasm to look out for the cars.

Only two persons were to be seen. One was the station-agent—a thin, sour-looking man with bloodless lips, who apparently regarded the arrival of a train as a personal affront. The other stood leaning one shoulder against the freight-room. His hands were buried deep in his pockets, and he had not moved a muscle since Robert left the train.

"Is there any hotel around here?" asked Robert of the station agent.

"Don't see any; do you?"

"Or any farmhouse where I can get some supper?"

"Might try Mindy's stopping-place."

"Yes, Mindy," came the voice of the other man, who had glided up noiselessly in moonbeamed feet. "I show you; I go there."

Robert looked at him—a wiry, square-shouldered man of uncertain age, with that unmistakable mark of the half-breed, a peculiar swarthy complexion through which the red seems to glow, and piercing black eyes.

"Sam'll show you," said the station-agent.

"Sam, what's your other name?"

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Sam," he said.

"Well, Sam, you lead and I'll follow," said Robert, good naturedly.

A few moments later the half-breed was striding down a well-worn pathway among the stumps with the sliding step and steady gait peculiar to those of Indian blood.

Mindy looked log hollow on the bank of a little stream not far from the Sunderland road. A slovenly-looking woman served Robert with supper, after which he made inquiries of Sam about the location of the Yellow River pine and the forest fire. Although hard to make talk, the half-breed seemed well informed on almost everything pertaining to the pine country.

"I show you," he said, confidentially; "I know fire—plenty big fire."

"Well, I'll see that you are well paid for your trouble," responded Robert, gratefully.

The next morning Sam was nowhere to be seen. About noon, however, he returned, dusty and somewhat travel-worn.

"I go hunt fire," he said. "Big fire up Yellow River."

Then he led Robert to the top of a little hill and pointed to the west. In the distance a faint line of brownish green showed where the Yellow River pine was, and over it hung a narrow grey cloud.

"Are you sure that's a forest fire?" Robert inquired anxiously, not a little surprised that the half-breed should have accepted his offer so promptly.

The long yellow finger was withdrawn slowly, and the half-breed glanced at Robert with two little wrinkles deepening at the corners of his eyes. "I find him," he said.

Robert was all energy in a moment. He felt that the time had come for him to vindicate himself before his uncle.

"Do you know the way up there?" he asked.

"Yes, I go—I know all land. I show you."

Miles and miles they tramped through a desolate wilderness of burned-over "outings" and sandy side-hills without a sign of animal life except the occasional dismal shriek of a woodpecker. The half-breed never turned or rested or offered to say a word until they reached the burning forest. Here the ground was blackened and smoking, licked clean of

every vestige of green foliage. In a few hollow trees the flames still roared, and the smoke belched out from the tops as if from factory chimneys. Robert strode from some distance over the smoking land. Then he stopped.

"How far do you suppose this fire will run?" he asked.

"Little fire—no count," and Sam shook his head in a deprecatory way. "Go Yellow River maybe, mobbo not."

"How are fires like this set?"

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you suppose some hunter let his camp-fire get away from him?"

"Or did some rascal set it on purpose?"

A still more expressive shrug.

Although Robert tramped through the burned forest until it was dark, choking with smoke and perspiring with heat, he could not find the least evidence as to how the fire originated.

"How much shall I pay you for your trip to-day?" asked Robert, when they returned to Gregg's that evening.

"You say," was the answer.

Robert gave him two dollars and without a word he turned and disappeared.

"That half-breed seems to know the country pretty well," Robert remarked to the station agent the next day.

"Yer," was the drawing reply; "he knows it well enough—pt'aps too well."

During the next week Robert busied himself in exploring each of the company's land as lay nearest to Gregg's. Within that time two other fires broke out, one of which swept over a valuable tract of land on the east side. Sam brought the earliest information and led Robert straight to the spot where the fire was fiercest, afterward receiving his pay without a word.

And with each investigation Robert grew more and more discouraged because he could not discover how the fires originated. They were certainly not accidental, but who set them?

"Sam," he said one day, "do you want to make a trip with me? I'm going right up into the country where those fires break out and see if I can't catch the rascals that way."

"I go; I know land," was the prompt reply.

Early the next morning they set out with a tent, a canoe and a complete pack. They crossed Yellow Lake and camped on the farther shore. It was a wild, desolate country, wholly uninhabited, and in the midst of the company's lands. There were no roads through it except the logging roads, and they were passable only in the winter when frozen.

Here for two weeks they lived quite comfortably, for there wasn't a single fire to trouble them. Robert told Sam that the rascals who set the fires knew they were being watched and kept out of sight; at which the half-breed shrugged his shoulders expressively.

But on the very day that Robert announced his intention of returning to Gregg's, Sam came running in from a hunting-trip with the information that he had discovered a fire. An investigation was promptly made, with the usual result of finding the fire without any difficulty at all and entirely missing the incendiary or any evidence of his presence.

"I don't see how Sam finds these things so much more easily than I do," he puzzled, "and I can't understand how he can lead me straight to them through the woods."

Then he stopped suddenly, slapped his knee and sprang to his feet. The implied warning of the station agent in regard to the half-breed came to him. What if Sam—and then Robert recalled swiftly the series of fires and the remarkable way in which Sam had discovered them? He also remembered how Sam had found a fire the moment he had suggested that it was time to break camp, which would throw the half-breed out of a job.

The blood surged hotly into Robert's face and he restrained himself with difficulty from springing upon the half-breed, doring in the sunshine, and shaking the truth out of him.

"Well, Sam," he said, as calmly as he could, "if there's no fire to-morrow, I guess we'll break camp and go back to Gregg's. It's about time for my uncle to come."

Before daybreak the next morning the half-breed crawled stealthily out of the tent.

"Where are you going?" inquired Robert, sleepily, although every sense was on the alert.

"Oh, go look round. Be back soon."

Robert rolled over as if he were going to sleep again. But no sooner had Sam left the tent than he sprang to his feet and slid into his clothing. Then he peeped out. The half-breed had stopped a moment to get something to eat, and was now swinging easily up the hill from the lake.

Robert quickly hid the rifle and the canoe paddles—no camper in the lumber country leaves his tent without taking this precaution—and then he examined the loads in his revolver, thrust it quickly into his pocket and followed. For ten minutes he ran steadily at a jog-trot of the kind that football players use when in training. Then he stopped, bent close to the ground and listened for a moment.

There was no sound! except the sizzling obster of a frightened ground squirrel. So he ran on again until he

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came to the brow of a little hill, and there within a dozen yards of him the half-breed was kneeling at a spring and scooping up the water in his hands.

For an instant Robert was sure that Sam had seen him, and his mind grasped for some excuse that would explain his presence. But the half-breed did not turn, and Robert dropped silently on his hands and knees and wriggled a few paces back. And there, hugging the ground, he watched the half-breed spring up, and, after tightening his belt, set off up the trail at the peculiar pace, half walk, half run, that reminded Robert of the steady swing of a deerhound in full cry.

He knew well that the half-breed could keep it up all day, and his heart sank as he thought of following him. But he set his teeth and ran, up hill and down, over logs, across little patches of poplar brush that had come out in the opening and clutched at him as he passed. When the half-breed paused, he paused, and when the half-breed started again, he started.

Two or three times he came dangerously near to being discovered on account of a croaking twig or the swish of bushes, and once, after a seemingly endless run, he was so short of breath that he feared his gasps might reveal his presence. But he only clenched his hands and resolved that he would never be beaten. He had been shamed and humiliated enough.

When the trail turned at the entrance of a deep ravine the half-breed stopped and narrowly examined the downhill, as if looking for something. He retraced his steps, with his eyes on the weedy pathway. Robert felt that he must surely be discovered, although he concealed himself as well as he could behind a punky log. Closer and closer Sam came, until he was only a few yards away, and then he seemed suddenly to discover what he was seeking. He gave a grunt of satisfaction and plunged into the woods again.

For a mile or so, as well as Robert could judge, he ran with even greater speed than before. At last, just as his pursuer felt that he could not follow another step, he stopped on the edge of a dry meadow, waving with crisp weeds and marsh grass.

Here he stopped over, and a fore Robert could realize what he was doing, or just how he had done it, he had kindled a fire. Then he crouched back and watched it eat out in all directions, the little flames leaping from hummock to hummock and sending up spirals of dense brown smoke.

Robert's eyes were fastened for a moment on the spreading fire. His suspicions were confirmed. He had been out-witted and imposed upon by a half-breed, and his visit had not only been in vain, but there had been more fires because he was searching for the incendiary; and he actually had paid the incendiary for setting them. His temples burned with anger and humiliation.

The half-breed, who had been sitting like a bit of brood stately, watching the fire eat and creep the long spear of marsh-grass, now slowly arose. Robert whipped out his revolver, clicked the trigger, and crept slowly forward. When just behind the half-breed he said, as calmly as he could: "So you're the man who's doing the burning?"

Like a flash the half-breed turned, his black eyes burning.

Robert raised his revolver and levelled it at him. "Don't you try to

get away," he said, "or you may get a hole through."

"Build campfire; he get away," said the half-breed, shrugging his shoulders, and glancing around at the fire, which now roared and crackled all over the little meadow.

"Yes, I've heard that story before," said Robert. "Now we're going back to camp; mind that you don't make any trouble."

"Go back to camp? Oh, I show you; I know land."

"Yes, and I know half-breeds," said Robert; "and I've had all the showing I want from you."

The fire ran on; it could not have spread very far, for Robert heard and saw no more of it. He and the half-breed were now moving rapidly through the woods, the half-breed a few paces ahead and Robert, with his revolver cocked, following. Mile after mile they travelled and not a word was spoken. They were rapidly nearing the camp and Robert was wondering how he would get his captive into Gregg's, when the half-breed, in passing a huge pine tree, suddenly darted behind it, ran a few steps, and disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up.

At first Robert was too much astonished to move and he never once thought of firing his revolver. But it was only for a moment. Tearing his way through the brush he discovered the ledge of rocks almost hidden with a thick growth of young pines. Frantically he jumped over it, a distance of eight or ten feet, and rushed wildly hither and thither trying to find his captive, but all in vain. The half-breed plainly had known the land much better than he knew it.

After ten minutes of excited beating through the bushes, Robert gave up in despair. He knew that he could never hope to find the cunning half-breed in such a place as this, and so, warm and weary and discouraged, he started for the camp. Indeed, in his disappointment and humiliation, the tears came into Robert's eyes. What would he ever say to his uncle?

By this time the tent came into view, and then the cool water of the lake. He was very thirsty. As he ran down the shore he was surprised to see his canoe floating on the water. He could not understand how it had slipped away from the moorings, for he had a very distinct recollection of pulling it up an unusual distance on the shore. It was hardly possible that any one could have been there in his absence, and if any one had, he could have had no use for the canoe without the paddles.

"I'll have to catch that canoe," he said to himself, suddenly, "or I'll never get out of this place alive," and he remembered how far it was to Gregg's, and how the half-breed had told him that in summer it was almost impossible to make the trip by land, owing to the marshes.

All this time the canoe had been drifting slowly out into the lake. "I'll swim for it," Robert said, aloud, and without more ado he stripped off his clothing. He liked the idea of a plunge in the cool water.

A moment later there was a flash of white shoulders in the sunshine, a running splash, and Robert was swimming easily out into the big, quiet lake. He plunged his heated face beneath the surface of the water and drank deep and long. He felt parched and dusky from his long run.

"It isn't much of a swim out there," he said to himself, "but I'll

have a sorry time getting her back without any paddle."

Then he laid his head dead in the water and with long, powerful under-strokes set the ripples running about his shoulders. He had always been a roddy, fearless swimmer, and he knew how to tread water and float and rest almost as well as he knew how to walk.

As he swam, the shores seem to unfold slowly and stretch away in longer lines. From beyond the furthest headland other headlands reached out and grew above the curve of the water. The pine forest on one side of the lake swarled slowly, the tallest staves silhouetted in black against the sky, like church steeples; and on the other side it grew larger and larger. Above, a few fleecy clouds floated high, and an osprey or two was wheeling lazily about. All these things the swimmer saw half-consciously.

Presently Robert paused in the water. He was a long distance from shore. He should have reached the canoe. Yet he saw with a plunge of the heart that it was almost as far away from him as ever. What could it mean?

Raising himself as high in the water as he could, he looked at it keenly. At the prow he saw a few faint ripples. If it were merely drifting there could be no ripples. And the prow nosed several inches deeper in the water than the stern. He remembered positively that it had been empty when he left camp that morning.

Then he noticed suddenly with vague terror. The canoe had begun to rock and pitch as if some huge creature of the lake was tossing it about. Then a long, bare, brown arm with grasping fingers slid around the gunwale, and there appeared the dripping head and bronzed shoulders of the swimmer.

Instantly Robert recognized the half-breed. "Stop there?" he shouted, angrily.

But across the water came a mocking cry, half laugh, half imprecation, and the half-breed, with his hand on the stern of the canoe, began to drive it calmly through the water.

For a moment a feeling of fear and hopelessness such as comes only to a swimmer in desperate straits all but overwhelmed Robert. Like a flash he saw the whole of the half-breed's cunning and cruel plan.

Sam had known that if Robert came down and saw him making off with the canoe he would open fire with the rifle—so fortunately hidden and that his chance to escape would be small. So he swam ahead and pulled the canoe gently after him to give the impression that it was drifting. He had undoubtedly known, too, that Robert would follow and be lured to his death in mid-lake.

Now there was no longer any necessity that the half-breed should swim ahead in a cramped position. His pursuer was far enough out in the lake to be harmless, and he could drift boldly behind and push.

For a moment Robert wavered. It was a long swim back—he could just see the white of his tent—and yet he felt that he could make it. But could he stand the disgrace and humiliation of being tricked and beaten by the half-breed?

At the very thought he set his teeth, plowed his head deeper into the water and followed. It was to be white man against red man to the bitter end. He did not stop to think of what might happen if he failed to catch his enemy, or of what might happen if he did catch him. He did not think of any-